

An Unexpected Journey by LibertyBelleAnne

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Summary: Steve goes through an important rite of passage, on the path his new life has led him.

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Disclaimer: The only thing I own is the time I spent getting inspiration for this story by going to my own brother's police graduation.

"His old life lay behind in the mists, dark adventure lay in front"

— J.R.R. Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings

The folding chairs were quickly filling up. One row in the front was taken up by six high school freshmen, two seniors and two parents. Sweaters and light jackets, used to fight against the chilly autumn air, were quickly being shed as the body heat of the growing crowd turned the room stiflingly warm.

"It's hotter then Mordor in here," complained Dustin loudly.

"No way," Mike argued, "Mordor has a literal active volcano."

"Yeah it's the only thing hot enough to melt the one ring," Lucas pointed out, "Which was made of magical metal,"

"The heat has nothing to do with it. It's all about taking it back to the ring's origins. Frodo could have taken it to the North Pole if that's where it was made," Dustin argued.

"Hey El hasn't gotten to that part," Mike chastised his friends' spoilers when the curly haired girl next to him looked at him questioningly.

"Yeah me neither. I haven't even made it past that Tom guy," Max turn and punches the two boys she's sandwiched between.

"I liked Tom Bombadil," The newly christened Jane added quietly.

"He has to be the ultimate creator," Dustin theorized, "With his knowledge and power,"

Lucas countered, "No he's definitely a nature spirit. Look what he did

to the tree."

"I think he's an angelic being of some kind. Sorta like Gandalf," Will added wisely.

"He's probably just some crazy old elf," Max snorted with disdain. That was the wrong thing to say. It caused a loud argument about Tom's importance to the story and dissolved into the young teens squabbling over which character was the best. It took both adults and seniors trying to quiet down the heated Lord of the Rings debate. All their efforts proved futile. It wasn't until the reason for their being there came in and sat down, that the Party members quieted down. Only because they wanted the opportunity to make silent faces, to make their seemingly perfectly composed babysitter laugh. It wasn't that hard. His death glare towards them didn't last long. The ceremony began.

"Welcome! We are pleased that so many could attend to support our cadets. They have spent hours doing rigorous physical training, shooting on the range and learning laws and police procedures. Each year cadets are chosen out of their class who have gone above and beyond in these three areas," The Dean began before introducing the Police Program Director to present the awards.

"The Best Marksman Award goes to a cadet who scored 93 percent at the range." The Director began before introducing the winning cadet's name.

"If it was a with a bat Steve would of got 100 percent," Dustin whispered with pride.

The Director continued with the next award, "The cadet who received the PT Award was recorded doing 94 push ups and 55 sit ups."

"Steve would've creamed em' if they were doing it in the upside down fighting off demodogs," Max added slamming one fist into her other hand.

"The Academic Award is determined by completed assignments, knowledge of the law, test and final exam scores."

There was a prolonged silence before Will whispered encouragingly, "We'll he's really improved. Nancy and Jonathon's tutoring really seemed to help."

"Yeah Hopper gave him a lot of firsthand experience too," Mike returned Jane Hopper's appreciative smile with a bright one of his own.

"The Director's Choice Award will be done at the end," The response caused the group of newly minted high schoolers to groan impatiently.

"Each year a cadet is chosen by the class to represent them. One young man stood above the rest. Who quietly lead by example and experience. This year's class representative is Steven Harrington." A blushing, slightly bumbling, Steve shook his superior's hand before stepping up to the microphone. He had to wait for his supportive, front row, section to quiet its antics before he could begin speaking.

"I remember being little and listening to my grandpa's stories of the war. He always talked about his buddies. How he'd do anything for them and them for him. And I always wanted that. Someone to care about me no matter what. I was kind of a selfish jackass growing up," The crowd laughed.

He continued after the laughter died out, "I live in Hawkins. A couple years ago a boy went missing. Shortly after that a girl in my class disappeared too. I've watched people do anything to help find them." Steve paused swallowing hard; probably thinking of fighting off monsters, friends going up against the government and a set of parents even willing to sell their home to hire a private investigator.

"I always thought I'd go to college and play ball then go into business. I didn't have the grades for it," He paused though another laugh break, "But I learned for real what it means to put it all on the line for other people, even strangers. I learned to care about other people before myself. That's why I'm standing up here today. So, doing my job means I can always help other people and keep those I care about safe. The world is full of bad stuff if I can beat a little of it back I'll be happy. Um... Yeah... Thanks...That's It." The new officer folded up his messily written down speech and went to sit back down among his

class.

After the applause died out the director stood once more announcing, "I am now proud to present the Regional Post Academy Class of 1985," The small class of police cadets began to be called up, by name, one at a time. Each new officer accepted their diploma from their various new police captains or department heads.

When the list got to Harrington eight teenagers jumped up. The only adult left among them, stayed seated but cheered just as loudly and excitedly as the kids giving a standing ovation for the newly graduated officer.

"You did good kid," Sheriff Hopper shook the hand of his department's newest officer.

After the final name was called the director had everyone sit back down before he announced the final class award.

"The Director's Choice Award is determined by the academic, physical, and firearm progress and prowess. One cadet was always the first one in the classroom and the last one to leave. He was always willing to help his fellow classmates and equally ready to learn from them. He has the makings of a fine officer and will do his department, town and family proud. Without further ado I'd like to award Director's Choice to Steven Harrington."

Steve's family let out a thunderous cheer as he received his final award. It had been a long hard road. With long distance phone calls full of despair, long night study sessions on the weekend, and as much on the job training as the Sheriff could squeeze in. They'd all known he was capable of amazing things and by his blinding smile he flashed their way, perhaps he'd started to believe it as well.

When the graduation ceremony ended, Steve found himself mobbed under by his favorite little shitheads. He also was helpfully blinded by a camera flashing nonstop.

"Hey, watch the uniform," He warned brushing off imaginary dust and wrinkles.

"You look like a boy scout," Max said flatly.

"Women dig a man in uniform," Steve defended pointedly ignoring the conspiratorial glance shared by the only other adults. He noticed a few of the kids making silent gagging faces behind their backs.

"Hey next time I'll be one of the first to know when weird shit hits the fan," He pulled the kids attention away to try and preserve the adults' moment.

"And you get to carry a gun," Dustin pointed out wistfully.

"Nancy's still a better shot," Mike pointed out loudly.

"Nancy shoots better than everyone," Jonathan piped up preparing his camera to take more pictures.

"Steve still rules with the spiked bat," Dustin informs loudly as he uses his newly acquired height to place a supportive arm around his adoptive brother's shoulders. The teen quickly finds himself trapped in a headlock, Steve mercilessly tussling his curls.

"We should go celebrate," Nancy interrupted, saving her favorite of her brother's friends.

"Yeah let's go eat," Dustin agreed trying to straighten his curls.

"Waffles," Jane said with an air of quiet finality.

"Waffles it is," Steve gently tussled her curls with a smile, "My treat,"

"Nope, it's your day," Joyce shot down that idea with a smirk. Steve knowing from past experience to not go up against a Byers' stubbornness just nodded with a smile.

"This is like when Aragorn was crowned King," Dustin interrupted excitedly.

"No Spoilers!" The Party all yelled at him.

"What's an Aragorn?" Steve asked trying to figure out which Dungeons and Dragons creature they were talking about. He wasn't

prepared for the four boys to gasp and start talking at him and each other at once. Besides picking up on their severe disappointment in him he caught something about a wizard, elves, something called a hobbit and a ring.

He shared a long-suffering look with his new boss before the Sheriff called for silence.

"We can discuss more about Fred and his magic ring over piles of unhealthy breakfast food," Hopper ordered herding the still arguing and slightly distraught nerds out the door towards the parking lot.

Steve watched his group leave. Looking down at his award, his crumpled-up speech and his new uniform and swallowed against the growing lump in his throat. This was not how he pictured his life going. He never pictured himself caring for little kids, fighting off monsters, or even being a cop. His parents were always emotionally, if not physically, absent. His new family that he'd found, or maybe they'd found him, were always there. His journey was hard and unexpected but, in the end, it had been worth it.

"Steve come on!" Dustin rushed back through the door pulling on Steve's arm. "You've got to read the book. El and Max are. It starts out with a Hobbit in a hole."

His journey wasn't over yet. He planned to enjoy every minute of it.

"All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." -Gandalf